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SUBJECT: PORTUGAL'S 2006 FOREST FIRE SEASON: BETTER THAN  
2005 BUT SUMMER NOT OVER YET

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Summary  
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11. (U) Portugal has experienced significantly fewer forest fires in comparison to the same period last year. However, the summer is only halfway over and the temperatures continue to rise. American technical assistance demonstrated its value when a fire break created by the United States Forest Service in March recently prevented a 300 hectare fire from becoming a 3000 hectare conflagration. The Ministry of Interior credits these efforts as well as improved detection and early response for the reduced incidence of fires this year. Others, including the Minister of Agriculture's Special Advisor on Forest Fires Tiago Oliveira, claim that the current structure for fire prevention and suppression remains intrinsically flawed. The 2006 fire season has claimed six casualties: five Chilean professional firefighters and one Portuguese volunteer firefighter. To stop such deaths and preserve the forest, the Portuguese Forest Service has launched a new forest fire awareness campaign. End Summary.

Less Forest Fires this Year  
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12. (U) As of July 18, the Ministry of Agriculture's Directorate of Forest Resources (DGRF) had registered 9,108 fire ignitions this year, resulting in a total burnt area of 9,560 hectares. Fifty-eight percent of the total land burnt stemmed from 17 fires more than 100 hectares in size. During the same period last year, there were 17,324 ignitions with a loss of 30,597 hectares of land. The hardest hit areas include the northern districts of Braga, Porto, and Vila Real. Better meteorological conditions, including winter rains more on par with historical averages and a milder start to the summer, greatly contributed to the reduced incidence of forest fires thus far in 2006. However, Minister of Interior Antonio Costa has insisted repeatedly in the press that improved vigilance and quicker responses stopped many small fires from turning into conflagrations. Since 1995, fires have destroyed 21% of Portugal's forests.

USDA Technical Assistance Reaps Rewards  
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13. (U) A fire break created by a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) team stopped a forest fire in northern Portugal from descending down into a valley, thus preventing a 300 hectare fire from expanding into a 3000 hectare fire. In February and March, a team of five USDA Forest Service

experts in prescribed burns worked alongside the Portuguese Forest Service on controlled burns, fire breaks, and other forest fire prevention activities. Following the visit, the USDA Forest Service donated 300 surplus fire-resistant, Nomex pants to the Portuguese to better equip firefighters. The pants arrived in July, and the Portuguese government expressed its thanks through a diplomatic note.

#### Vigilance Only Part of the Solution

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¶4. (U) PolEconoff recently visited the state-of-the-art Surveillance and Warning Division of the National Service for Fire and Civil Protection, currently run by International Visitor Program candidate Pedro Patricio. The center monitors all activities related to forest fires and other disasters including monitoring calls from the municipalities, tracking the movement of helicopters and firefighters, and collecting data from remote cameras. Patricio commented on the fairly quiet fire season thus far, but predicted the situation would worsen once the "30 rule" prevails: when the wind blows from the east at more than 30 km/hour, humidity levels are under 30%, and the temperature is above 30 degrees Celsius.

¶5. (SBU) According to Patricio, the current detection and response system functions well with small fires. Any forest fire that fails to be contained within twelve hours becomes a catastrophe. He blamed the unavailability of volunteer firefighters and the lack of coordination and command as two main weaknesses for quickly combating forest fires. Given the small number of professional firefighters usually located in urban areas, Portugal relies on volunteers and forest association workers (sapadores florestais) to tackle forest

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fires. Portugal has more than 40,000 registered volunteer firefighters and more than 400 volunteer associations, but this fails to represent the actual availability of the people during a forest fire. In 2005, the highest number of volunteer firefighters available throughout the whole country on any given day was 3,000. Coupled with the lack of manpower, coordination and command during a forest fire continues to be a problem. Patricio stated that some improvements had been made with the addition of more command positions at both the national and district level. However, authorities and firefighters at the municipal level still chafe at taking orders from anyone brought in from the outside to take overall command of a forest fire response. Only time and improved training for incoming firefighters would change this mindset.

#### Casualties

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¶6. (U) Five Chilean firefighters and one Portuguese volunteer firefighter were the first casualties of the 2006 forest fire season. They died July 9 fighting a fire in Familicao da Serra, near the northwestern border with Spain. The Chileans worked for Afocela, an association created by cellulose producing companies to protect their forest lands. Part of a helicopter advance team, the Chileans were trying to open up a vehicle and water route to the fire when they were surrounded by flames. Interior Minister Costa interrupted his trip to the Europe-Africa Summit on Immigration in Rabat to travel to the scene. Initial reports indicate that lack of coordination on the ground as well as the changing fire behavior contributed to the deaths.

#### Agriculture Minister's Forest Fire Advisor Resigns

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¶7. (SBU) The Minister of Agriculture's Forest Fire Advisor, Tiago Oliveira, resigned from his position June 30 to return to the private sector. The driving force behind The National Plan for the Defense of Forests against Fires (reftel A) and

forest fire prevention efforts in Portugal, Oliveira believed that, while some progress has been made over the past three years, much more could have been accomplished. He expressed frustration that many of the recommendations outlined by USDA Forest Fire officials Mark Beighley and Michael Quisenberry in their August 2004 report (reftel B) had still not been implemented due to political pressures and in-fighting. The Ministry of Interior and the fire-fighters continue to resist the creation of any organizational unit outside their direct control. The Ministry of Interior is responsible for fire suppression, while the Ministry of Agriculture has the lead on prevention efforts. According to Oliveira, the Minister of Agriculture decided in early 2006 not to fight for these two responsibilities to be placed under only one organizational entity, choosing instead to focus his political capital on pushing domestic agriculture and CAP reform.

#### Public Awareness Campaign Launched

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18. (U) In June, the Ministry of Agriculture's Directorate of Forest Resources (DGRF) launched a new public awareness campaign, entitled "Between Ash and Green: You Decide". Through television, radio, and newspaper announcements, the campaign aims to increase awareness of the economic and ecological importance of the forests as well as human actions that cause forest fires. Specific demographic groups targeted include hunters, farmers, forest owners, the youth, and campers. DGRF hopes to emphasize that behaviors once considered the norm and acceptable in the past (i.e. burning trash in fields, unattended camp fires) now pose too much of a fire risk due to changing climatic conditions, overgrowth of farm and forest lands due to the exodus of farmers to towns, and current land-use patterns.

#### Comment

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19. (U) Milder weather, better rains, and a bit of luck rather than a new comprehensive fire prevention and suppression program account for the lower incidence of forest fires so far this year. USDA technical assistance demonstrated the value of controlled burns and forest fire prevention, and some progress has been made in improving the command and control structure. However, until there is greater political will to place responsibility for both prevention and suppression under a single entity, any actions undertaken are likely only to serve as a temporary solution

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to the forest fire problem in Portugal.  
Hoffman